

Liberal Education and Global Responsibility

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“The name of our land has been wiped out.”  
Euripides, *Trojan Women*

“Not to be a fan of the Greens or Blues at the races, or the light-armed or heavy-armed gladiators at the Circus.”  
Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

I

The towers of Troy are burning. All that is left of the once-proud city is a group of ragged women, bound for slavery, their husbands dead in battle, their sons murdered by the conquering Greeks, their daughters raped. Hecuba their queen invokes the king of the gods, using, remarkably, the language of democratic citizenship: “Son of Kronus, Council-President of Troy, father who gave us birth, do you see these undeserved sufferings that your Trojan people bear?” The Chorus answers grimly, “He sees, and yet the great city is no city. It has perished, and Troy exists no longer.” A little later, Hecuba herself concludes that the gods are not worth calling on, and that the very name of her land has been wiped out.

In one way, the ending of this drama is as bleak as any in the history of tragic drama. Death, rape, slavery, fire destroying the towers, the city’s very name effaced from the record of history by the acts of rapacious and murderous Greeks. And yet, of course, it did not happen that way, not exactly. For the story of Troy’s fall is being enacted, some six hundred years after the event, by a company of Greek actors, in the Greek language of a Greek poet, in the presence of all the adult citizens of Athens, most powerful of Greek cities. Hecuba’s cry to the gods even imagines him as a peculiarly Athenian type of civic official, president of the city council. So the name of the land didn’t get wiped out after all. The imaginations of the conquerors were haunted by it, transmitted it, and mourn it. Obsessively their arts repeat the events of long-ago destruction, typically inviting, as here, the audience’s compassion for the women of Troy and blame for their assailants. In its very structure the play makes a claim for the moral value of compassionate imagining, as it asks its audience to partake in the terror of a burning city, of murder and rape and slavery. Insofar as members of the audience are engaged by this drama, feeling fear and grief for the conquered city, they demonstrate the ability of compassion to cross lines of time, place and nation – and also, in the case of many audience members, the line of sex, perhaps more difficult yet to cross.

Nor was the play an aesthetic event cut off from political reality. The dramatic festivals of Athens were sacred festivals strongly connected to the idea of democratic deliberation, and the plays of Euripides were particularly well known for their engagement with contemporary events. In this case, the audience that watched *The Trojan Women* had recently voted to put to death the men of the rebellious colony of Melos and to enslave the women and children. Euripides invites them to contemplate the real human meaning of their actions. Compassion for the women of Troy should at least cause moral unease, reminding Athenians of the full and equal humanity of people who live in distant places, their fully human capacity for suffering.

But did those imaginations really cross those lines? Think again of that invocation of Zeus. Trojans, if they worshipped Zeus as king of gods at all, surely did not refer to him as the president of the city council. The term *prytanis* is an Athenian legal term, completely unknown elsewhere. So it would appear that Hecuba is not a Trojan but a Greek. Her imagination is a Greek democratic (and, we might add, mostly male) imagination. Maybe that’s a good thing, in the sense that the audience is surely invited to view her as their fellow and equal. But it still should give us pause. Did compassion really enable those Greeks to reach

out and think about the real humanity of others, or did it stop short, allowing them to reaffirm the essential Greekness of everything that's human? Of course compassion required making the Trojans somehow familiar, so that Greeks could see their own vulnerability in them. But it's so easy for the familiarization to go too far: they are just us, and we are the ones who suffer humanly. Not those other ones, over there in Melos.

America's towers, too, have burned. Compassion and terror are in the fabric of our lives. And now we must face the fact that we, like the Greek army, have been not only victims but also causes of turmoil and violence in foreign lands. In the lives of Americans since 9/11, we do see evidence of the good work of compassion, as Americans make real to themselves the sufferings of so many different people whom they never would otherwise have thought about: New York firefighters, bereaved families of so many national and ethnic origins, even, sometimes, Arab-Americans who have suffered unfairly from airport searches and other types of mistreatment. Sometimes our compassion even crosses that biggest line of all, the national boundary. Tragedy has surely led many people to sympathize with the women of Afghanistan in a way that feminists tried to get people to do for ages, without success. All too often, however, the nation is the stopping place. It is so easy for Americans to be ignorant of other nations and cultures, because America is so powerful and the English language so universal. It is so easy, too, for Americans to be emotionally narrow, caring intensely only about the fate of one nation.

This narrowness is well known, in philosophical debates about the value of compassion as a moral sentiment. Adam Smith, in the mid-eighteenth century, offered one of the best accounts we have of sympathy and compassion, and of the ethical achievements of which this moral sentiment is capable. But when he came to revise his work after a life spent in politics, he added a section that issues a solemn warning against trusting this imperfect sentiment too far when we are trying to get clear about our obligations to people at a distance. The compassionate imagination, he argues, is fickle and partisan:

Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connection with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity. He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment....And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance. If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the more profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.

That's just the issue that should trouble us, as we think about American reactions to current world events after 9/11. We see a lot of "humane sentiments" around us, and extensions of sympathy beyond people's usual sphere of concern. But how often, both now and at other times, those sentiments stop short at the national boundary. The genocide in Rwanda didn't even work up enough emotion in us to prompt humanitarian intervention. Floods, earthquakes, cyclones – and the daily deaths of thousands from preventable malnutrition and disease – none of these makes the American world come to a standstill, none elicits a

tremendous outpouring of grief and compassion. At most we get what Smith so trenchantly described: a momentary flicker of feeling, quickly dissipated by more pressing concerns close to home.

And sometimes things are still worse: our sense that the “us” is all that matters can easily flip over into a demonizing of an imagined “them”, a group of outsiders who are imagined as enemies of the invulnerability and the pride of the all-important “us.” Just as parents’ compassion for their own children can all too easily slide into an attitude that promotes the defeat of other people’s children, so too with patriotism: compassion for our fellow Americans can all too easily slide over into an attitude that wants America to come out on top, defeating or subordinating other peoples or nations.

One vivid example of this slide took place at a baseball game I went to at Chicago’s Comiskey Park, the first game played there after September 11 – and a game against the Yankees, so there was a heightened awareness of the situation of New York and its people. Things began well, with a moving ceremony commemorating the firefighters who had lost their lives, and honoring local firefighters who had gone to New York afterwards to help out. There was even a lot of cheering when the Yankees took the field, a highly unusual transcendence of local attachments. But as the game went on and the beer flowed, one heard, increasingly, the chant “U-S-A. U-S-A,” a chant left over from the Olympic hockey match in which the U. S. defeated Russia. This chant seemed to express a wish for America to defeat, abase, humiliate its enemies. Indeed, it soon became a general way of expressing the desire to crush one’s enemies, whoever they were. When the umpire made a bad call that went against the Sox, the same group in the stands turned to him, chanting “U-S-A.” In other words, anyone who crosses us is evil, and should be crushed. It’s not surprising that Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, trying to educate himself to have an equal respect for all human beings, reports that his first lesson was “Not to be a fan of the Greens or Blues at the races, or the light-armed or heavy-armed gladiators at the Circus.”

How can we educate American citizens who do take seriously the reality of lives outside America, and who think of political events accordingly? Citizens who are not simply Americans, but citizens of the entire world, committed to both compassion and justice for the millions who suffer, not only from war, but from daily preventable tragedies such as malnutrition and disease? A child born in the U. S. today has life expectancy at birth of 78.6 years. A child born in Sierra Leone has life expectancy at birth of 38 years. In approximately one third of the world’s nations, less than 50 percent of women can read and write. How can we educate American citizens who think responsibly about such problems, and America’s role in forming a world community to work on their solution? And what role does our tradition of liberal education at the college and university level play in this process of forming imaginative and compassionate world citizens? In this talk I will first confront a problem about the imagination, the one that is mentioned in my example from Greek tragedy. Then I shall talk about the role of the idea of liberal arts education, an idea increasingly taking hold around the world, in producing the sort of citizen who is well placed to solve this problem as well as it may be solved.

## II

Let’s look first at the compassionate imagination. Compassion is an emotion rooted, probably, in our biological heritage. But this history does not mean that compassion is devoid of thought. In fact, as Aristotle argued long ago, human compassion requires three thoughts: that a serious bad thing has happened to someone else; that this bad event was not (or not entirely) the person’s own fault; and that we ourselves are vulnerable in similar ways. Thus compassion forms a psychological link between our own self-interest and the reality of another person’s good or ill. For that reason it is a morally valuable emotion – when it gets things right. Often, however, the thoughts involved in the emotion, and therefore the emotion itself, go astray, failing to link people at a distance to one’s own current possibilities and vulnerabilities. (Rousseau said that kings don’t feel compassion for their subjects because they count on never being human, subject to the vicissitudes of life.) Sometimes, too,

compassion goes wrong by getting the seriousness of the bad event wrong: sometimes, for example, we just don't take very seriously the hunger and illness of people who are distant from us. These errors are likely to be built into the nature of compassion as it develops in childhood and then adulthood: we form intense attachments to the local first, and only gradually learn to have compassion for people who are outside our own immediate circle. For many Americans, that expansion of moral concern stops at the national boundary.

Most of us are brought up to believe that all human beings have equal worth. At least the world's major religions and most secular philosophies tell us so. But our emotions don't believe it. We mourn for those we know, not for those we don't know. And most of us feel deep emotions about America, emotions we don't feel about India, or Russia, or Rwanda. In and of itself, this narrowness of our emotional lives is probably acceptable and maybe even good. We need to build outward from meanings we understand, or else our moral life would be empty of urgency. Aristotle long ago said, plausibly, that the citizens in Plato's ideal city, asked to care for all citizens equally, would actually care for none, since care is learned in small groups with their more intense attachments. Plato tried to remove partiality by removing family ties, and asking all citizens to care equally for all other citizens. Aristotle says that the difficulty with this strategy is that "there are two things above all that make people love and care for something, the thought that it is all theirs, and the thought that it is the only one they have. Neither of these will be present in that city." (*Pol.* 1262b22-3). Because nobody will think of a child that it is all theirs, entirely their own responsibility, the city will, he says, resemble a household in which there are too many servants, so nobody takes responsibility for any task. Because nobody will think of any child or children that they are the only ones they have, the intensity of care that characterizes real families will simply not appear, and we will have, he says, a "watery" kind of care all round (1262b15).

Aristotle's followers, the ancient Greek and Roman Stoics, denied this: they said that we can and should care for all people equally. Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, who was also the Roman Emperor, wrote a book of solitary self-scrutiny entitled *To Himself*. He argues that our moral task is to unlearn systematically all our local attachments. As I said, he reports that the first lesson he learned from his tutor was "not to be a fan of the Greens or Blues at the races, or the light-armed or heavy-armed gladiators at the Circus" (I.5).

The question Marcus's reflections raise for us is, whether this negative lesson leaves the personality enough resources to motivate intense concern with people anywhere. Marcus tells us of the meditative exercises that he regularly performs, in order to get himself to the point at which the things that divide people from one another do not matter to him. Getting to the point where we can give concern even-handedly to all human beings requires, as Marcus makes abundantly clear, the systematic extirpation of intense cares and attachments directed at the local: one's family, one's city, the objects of one's love and desire. Thus Marcus needs to learn not only not to be a sports fan, but also not to be a lover. Consider the following extraordinary passage, describing his spiritual exercises:

How important it is to represent to oneself, when it comes to fancy dishes and other such foods, "This is the corpse of a fish, this other thing the corpse of a bird or a pig." Similarly, "This Falernian wine is just some grape juice," and "This purple vestment is some sheep's hair moistened in the blood of some shellfish." When it comes to sexual intercourse, we must say, "This is the rubbing together of membranes, accompanied by the spasmodic ejaculation of a sticky liquid." How important are these representations, which reach the thing itself and penetrate right through it, so that one can see what it is in reality. (VI.13)<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup>Based on Hadot/Chase (1998), with some modifications.

Not being a fan of the Blues means, too, not being a fan of this body or that body, this soul or that soul, this city or that city.

But getting rid of our erotic investment in bodies, sports teams, family, nation – all this leads us into a strange world, a world that is gentle and unaggressive, but also strangely lonely and hollow, a world of justice without a basis in love, even-handedness without any strong reason why even-handedness should matter -- a life that is in crucial respects not human life any longer. The human life we know is unfair, uneven, full of war, full of me-first nationalism and divided loyalty. But Marcus sees that we can't so easily remove these attachments while retaining humanity. So, if that ordinary humanity is unjust, get rid of it. But can we live like this, once we see the goal with Marcus's naked clarity? Isn't justice something that must be about and for the living? It is not very surprising that Marcus, while a basically good emperor, was a terrible father, producing a son whom the film *Gladiator* correctly depicts as a moral monster. (The film actually errs in the direction of softening, since it leaves out the ways in which Commodus systematically tortured wild animals, arranging mass giraffe hunts, etc.) It's hard to say, given what we know, but such a man, caring for nothing, might have been produced by this gentle father's utter lack of particular love.

### III

Let me proceed on the hypothesis Marcus was in one way right: removing attachments to the local and the particular does deliver to us a death within life. Let me also proceed on the hypothesis that we should reject this course as an unacceptable route to the goal of world justice, or even one that makes the very idea of justice a hollow fantasy.

It looks as if we are back where Aristotle leaves us: with the unreliability of the compassionate imagination, and yet the need to rely on it, since we have no more perfect motive. This does not mean that we need give up on the idea of equal human dignity, or respect for it. But insofar as we retain, as well, our local attachments, our relation to that motive must always remain complex and dialectical, a difficult conversation within ourselves as we ask how much humanity requires of us, and how much we are entitled to give to our own. But any such difficult conversation will require, for its success, the work of the imagination. If we don't have exceptionless principles, if, instead, we need to negotiate our lives with a complex combination of moral reverence and erotic attachment, we need to have a keen imaginative and emotional understanding of what our choices mean for people in conditions of many different kinds, and the ability to move resourcefully back and forth from the perspective of our personal loves and cares to the perspective of the distant. Not the extirpation of compassion, then, but its extension and education. Compassion within the limits of respect. How might such an extension be arranged? And what role might the idea of liberal arts education play in its education and extension?

The philosophical tradition helps us identify places where compassion goes wrong: by making errors about fault, about seriousness, about the circle of concern. But the ancient tradition, not being very interested in childhood, does not help us see clearly how and why it goes especially badly wrong. So to begin the task of educating compassion as best we can, we need to ask how and why local loyalties and attachments come to take in some instances an especially virulent and aggressive form, militating against a more general sympathy. To answer this question we need a level of psychological understanding that was not available in the ancient Greek and Roman world, or not completely. I would suggest that one problem we particularly need to watch out for is a type of pathological narcissism in which the person demands complete control over all the sources of good, and a complete self-sufficiency in consequence. This pathology occurs repeatedly in human life. Aristotle saw it in people who thought they could never suffer, and who in consequence, he said, cannot have compassion for others: he called this a *hubristike diathesis*, an overweening disposition. Rousseau saw it in the kings and nobles of France, who thought that they were above the usual frailties of human life – and who once again, in consequence, prove unable to have compassion for the

sufferings of those “below” them, sufferings that they themselves largely cause. But perhaps this pathology occurs with particular regularity in America, where young people are brought up to think that they are part of a nation that is on top of the world, and that they should expect to be completely in control of everything important in their lives, in consequence. Recent studies of troubled teens in America, particularly the impressive work of Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, in their book *Raising Cain*, has given strong support to this idea. Kindlon and Thompson focus on boys, and they do believe that the problems they bring to light have a gendered aspect, but they are also signs of more general cultural problems. The boys that Kindlon and Thompson study have learned from their culture that real men should be controlling, self-sufficient, dominant. They should never have, and certainly never admit to, fear and weakness. The consequence of this deformed expectation, Kindlon and Thompson show, is that these boys come to lack an understanding of their own vulnerabilities, needs and fears, weaknesses that all human beings share. They lack the language in which to characterize their own inner world, and they are by the same token clumsy interpreters of the emotions and inner lives of others. This emotional illiteracy is closely connected to aggression, as fear is turned outward, with little real understanding of the meaning of aggressive words and acts for the feelings of others. Kindlon and Thompson’s boys, some ten years later, make the sports fans who chanted “U-S-A” at the ump, who think of all obstacles to American supremacy and self-sufficiency as opponents to be humiliated. It is more than a little unfortunate that the foreign policy of our nation is sometimes formed and expressed, today, in terms that reinforce these pathologies: we won’t let anyone threaten our preeminence, we’ll strike first against them, etc.

So the first recommendation I would make for a culture of respectful compassion is one that was also made by Rousseau. It is, that an education in common human weakness and vulnerability should be a very profound part of the education of all children. Young people, especially when they are at the crucial time when they are on the verge of adulthood, should learn to be tragic spectators, and to understand with increasing subtlety and responsiveness the predicaments to which human life is prone. Through stories and dramas, history, film, and the study of the global economic system, they should get the habit of decoding the suffering of another, and this decoding should deliberately lead them into lives both near and far. That ability lies at the core of the classic idea of liberal arts education, which insists on common experiences of imagination and understanding, as young people prepare for citizenship and for life. Our independent colleges typically follow Rousseau, bringing young people together not just around a pre-professional or a technical training, but around a larger cultivation of their common humanity, and a deepening of the understandings that can connect one human life to another.

But let me now dissect the concept of liberal education a little more analytically. I shall focus here on its humanistic part. I do not mean to deny that the sciences also contribute crucial elements to liberal education, but perhaps I will be forgiven for focusing on the humanities, since it is that part of the curriculum that is so often under fire, criticized both as useless and as politically controversial. The ideas I shall be developing have many sources in many traditions. As a scholar working on India, and often lecturing and teaching in India, I know that they have deep roots in Indian traditions, in the thought of Nobel-prize winning poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore, who was also a leading thinker about education, and founder of a progressive school and an interdisciplinary university. I shall come back to those examples later. But now I shall focus on the Western sources of these ideas.

The very term “liberal education” derives from the Roman philosopher Seneca, who was also a leading politician, in an era of great anxiety and conflict. So let me begin with his reflections: Let me begin with Seneca, who lived in a Rome torn by conflict of many kinds. In the letter that invents our modern concept of liberal education, he begins by describing the usual style of Roman education, noting that it is called “liberal” (*liberalis*, “connected to freedom”), because it is understood to be an education for well-brought-up young gentlemen, who were called the *liberales*, the “free-born.” It was an acculturation into Roman traditions,

in which young people simply absorbed received values. He himself, he now announces, would use the term “liberal” in a very different way. In his view, an education is truly “liberal” only if it is one that “liberates” the student’s mind, encouraging him or her to take charge of his or her own thinking, leading the Socratic examined life and becoming a reflective critic of traditional practices. (I say “him or her” not just out of contemporary political correctness: Stoic philosophers of the first century AD wrote at length about the equal education of women, and defended the radical view that women as much as men should lead the examined life.) Seneca goes on to argue that only this sort of education will develop each person’s capacity to be fully human, by which he means self-aware, self-governing, and capable of respecting the humanity of all our fellow human beings, no matter where they are born, no matter what social class they inhabit, no matter what their gender or ethnic origin. “Soon we shall breathe our last,” he concludes in his related treatise *On Anger*. “Meanwhile, while we live, while we are among human beings, let us cultivate our humanity.”

So that is the basic idea, and it is that idea that Rousseau is reappropriating in modern form when he urges his young pupil Emile to develop an understanding of the general shape of human life, the vulnerabilities and possibilities that link all human beings to one another. This concept of a link between liberal education and a deeper and more inclusive kind of citizenship has a special urgency in our times, as we struggle with the burdens of being American in an era of American domination, asking ourselves what we owe to the rest of the world, how we can rightly take our place in international debates of many sorts. Americans especially often link up to the rest of the world through a very thin set of connections: in particular, as consumers and people involved in business, we connect to the rest of the world above all through the global market, that sees human lives as instruments for gain. If institutions of higher education do not build a richer network of human connections it is likely that our dealings with one another will be mediated by the impoverished norms of market exchange and profit-making. And these impoverished norms do not help, to put it mildly, if what we want is a world of peace, where people will be able to live fruitful cooperative lives.

That is the general task of the liberal arts portion of a college or university education in our era, as I see it: to cultivate the humanity of students so that they are capable of relating to other human beings not through economic connections alone, but through a deeper and wider set of human understandings.

I have argued, in a book called *Cultivating Humanity*, that three capacities, above all, are essential to the cultivation of humanity in today’s world, and they are all, I believe, built into the structure of education, in differing degrees, in many of our liberal arts colleges and universities. First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions -- for living what, following Socrates, we may call “the examined life.” This means a life that accepts no belief as authoritative simply because it has been handed down by tradition or become familiar through habit, a life that questions all beliefs and accepts only those that survive reason’s demand for consistency and for justification. Training this capacity requires developing the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgment. Testing of this sort frequently produces challenges to tradition, as Socrates knew well when he defended himself against the charge of “corrupting the young.” But he defended his activity on the grounds that democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves rather than simply deferring to authority, who can reason together about their choices rather than just trading claims and counter-claims. Like a gadfly on the back of a noble but sluggish horse, he said, he was waking democracy up so that it could conduct its business in a more reflective and reasonable way. Our democracy, like ancient Athens, is prone to hasty and sloppy reasoning, and to the substitution of invective for real deliberation. We need Socratic teaching to fulfill the promise of democratic citizenship. A liberal arts college that helps young people speak in their own voice and to respect the voices of others will have done a great deal to produce thoughtful and potentially creative world citizens, citizens who can understand Hecuba’s suffering without imposing on it their own schemes of domination.

Citizens who cultivate their humanity need, further, my second element, an ability to see themselves as not simply citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern: as “citizens of the world,” as the ancient Greco-Roman tradition that Seneca belonged to expressed the idea. That is the problem, of course, that I have been focused on since the start of this lecture: jolting the imagination out of its complacency, and getting it to take seriously the reality of lives at a distance – without losing its moorings in family and local loves. Cultivating our humanity in a complex interlocking world involves understanding the ways in which common needs and aims are differently realized in different circumstances. This requires a great deal of knowledge that American college students rarely got in previous eras, knowledge of non-Western cultures, and also of minorities within their own, of differences of gender, race and sexuality. In the years since I wrote the book, there has been great progress integrating the study of race, gender and sexuality into undergraduate curricula of many kinds. There has been much less progress conveying an adequate understanding of the reality of an interlocking world order. I believe that it is very urgent that all undergraduates should be led into the rudiments of world history, and a basic understanding of the major world religions; they should then learn to inquire in more depth into at least one unfamiliar culture. We walk around the world sealed in a mantle of Americanness, helped in our ignorance by the fact that English is the dominant world language and that the U. S. is such a dominant nation. We must become more curious and more humble about our role in the world, and we will do this only if undergraduate education is reformed in this direction.

One further point that I would make in this area is that the study of a foreign language is an extremely important part of developing this sort of global understanding. Even if the language is that of a relatively familiar culture, the sheer activity of seeing the world from the viewpoint of another culture’s ways of carving it up and expressing what is important in it, the sheer understanding of why translation is always imperfect and a reinterpretation, is humbling, the best reminder there can be that not all intelligent people have the same view of life. It is quite shocking that we have so few young people who speak Arabic, and so few who are really conversant in any non-Western language.

But, now, let me turn to the third part of my proposal. Citizens cannot think well on the basis of factual knowledge alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to the first two, can be called the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. That is why I began this lecture with Hecuba and why I have focused throughout on the development of capacities for imaginative and emotional understanding, capacities that we associate with literature and the other arts. The great John Dewey long ago argued that the arts were modes of intelligent perception and experience that should play a crucial role in education, forming the civic imagination. Even before him, Rousseau, argued that young Emile would only become a good citizen, with compassion for the poor and the downtrodden, if he did have an education nourished by the narrative imagination of human predicaments.

Courses in literature and the arts can impart this ability in many ways, through engagement with many different works of literature, music, fine art and dance. But thought needs to be given to what the student’s particular blind spots are likely to be, and texts should be chosen in consequence. For all societies at all times have their particular blind spots, groups within their culture and also groups abroad that are especially likely to be dealt with ignorantly and obtusely. Works of art can be chosen to promote criticism of this obtuseness, and a more adequate vision of the unseen. Ralph Ellison, in a later essay about his great novel *Invisible Man*, wrote that a novel such as his could be “a raft of perception, hope, and entertainment” on which American culture could “negotiate the snags and whirlpools” that stand between us and our democratic ideal. His novel, of course, takes the “inner eyes” of the white reader as its theme and its target. The hero is invisible to white society, but he tells us

that this invisibility is an imaginative and educational failing on their part, not a biological accident on his.

So we need to cultivate our students' "inner eyes," and this means carefully crafted courses in the arts and humanities, which bring students into contact with issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and cross-cultural experience and understanding. This artistic instruction can and should be linked to the "citizen of the world" instruction, since works of art are frequently an invaluable way of beginning to understand the achievements and sufferings of a culture different from one's own.

What I have just outlined seems pretty unsurprising, since these values are already well entrenched in American concepts of liberal education, and realized in many different ways in colleges and universities of many different kinds. Though more work clearly needs to be done, especially in the international part of the proposal, there are signs of broad commitment to these goals. But in concluding I'd like to mention that this conception of education is by no means to be taken for granted. In fact, although its origin is ancient, as I've said, in modern times it has flourished more or less only in the U. S. In Europe and Asia, for the most part, university students enter to read a single subject only, and higher education is understood to be basically pre-professional, rather than a general preparation for citizenship and life.

Recently, educators around the world have begun to worry about this problem, and have begun to feel the absence of a general liberal arts focus in higher education as a defect that makes it much harder to produce citizens who can think well about the problems of difference that increasingly vex the European nations and the problems of international understanding that are urgently on the agenda for all nations. I have been involved in efforts to get liberal arts education going in Sweden and in Italy, in Germany and in Bangladesh. Let me just say a little about the last example, in order to show why the idea of liberal education is increasingly taking center stage.

One of the gravest problems faced by all developing countries is the education of women. In about one third of the world's nations, fewer than 50 percent of women can even read and write. In the nations of South Asia – India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan – the gender gap is large, although regional variations, and the shining example of Sri Lanka, show that this gap is not caused by economic necessity and can be solved by wise public planning. Public universities do far too little to recruit women from deprived rural backgrounds and to give them the remedial training they often need. Moreover, even more important, the narrow pre-professional training on offer at such universities does not do well at preparing women for leadership positions. Often trained to be passive and unassertive, women do not learn to think critically, or to question dominant assumptions of gender that define their role. In general, the female leaders of the nations of South Asia, both academic and political, tend to be people who have been lucky enough to go and get a liberal arts education abroad; these, of course, are likely to be the wealthy few. For this reason, some new efforts at educating women have increasingly turned to the liberal arts model: both in Dubai and in Karachi, such enterprises are being tested.

The most ambitious such enterprise is still in the planning stages, and I am excited about being involved in it. An international group, led by a lawyer from Bangladesh, is establishing a new University for Women. Called Asian University for Women, it will focus on women from South Asia and on women from less than prosperous rural backgrounds. It has been given a land grant by the government of Bangladesh, quite a progressive government on women's issues. The ideas nourishing the curricular planning derive from many sources, and are truly international. One prominent source is in the educational ideas of Rabindranath Tagore, who founded a school and university in Santiniketan, near Calcutta, that focus on training of the imagination through the arts, and on encouraging thinking that is both rooted in the local scene and truly cosmopolitan. [Amita Sen, and women dancing, as an image of women's freedom] There are already such private universities springing up all over Asia – in Dubai, in Karachi, in Japan, everywhere where women's education requires particular

emphasis, and where people familiar with the liberal arts tradition have concluded that it supplies resources for critical thinking and empowerment that no other tradition does.

The group of curricular planners for AUW is mostly from South Asia, but I'm honored to be a hanger on. One thing we all feel very strongly about is the idea of liberal arts education. Even though this is not a popular type of education in the region, AUW is committed to it, out of the shared belief that nothing else can produce the sort of resourceful and critical world citizen that these nations badly need if they are to solve their problems. Our curriculum is still in progress, but here is what it says about the core principles for the Humanities:

The general aim of this part of the curriculum should be to produce young women who can think resourcefully for themselves, participate in discussions of current events and the problems of their region with the capacity to criticize received ideas, with sufficient confidence in their own ideas and initiatives, and with respect and understanding for people who think differently. It is very important that these women be widely and generally informed about world history, world religions, and the ethical debates surrounding globalization and other related pressing issues, and that they should become intelligent participants in these debates, with a strong awareness of ethical issues. At the same time, it is also very important to develop the imagination, so that these women are able to express themselves through the arts and to think creatively about the predicaments of people near and far.

We intend to have, in the first year, a focus on critical thinking and writing, and then a study of major accounts of social justice, with special emphasis on the problems of developing countries. Throughout the curriculum the theme of gender will be woven in, and women will be encouraged to think critically about gender roles, even while being encouraged to do gender differently, becoming active and participatory rather than docile and quiet.

Such ideas are realized in many American universities, but they are increasingly under pressure from cost-cutting and increasing pre-professionalism. What I want to suggest is that our own preference for this mode of education is no mere accident, and no mere local prejudice, but an idea that has good arguments behind it, when we think about citizenship in the contemporary world. It is for this reason that this idea, more or less despite its American connections, is increasingly catching on in elsewhere in the world, as a way to empower women, to energize democracy, and to enrich global debates. It would be most unfortunate if Americans turned away from these ideas, by decreasing expenditures on the humanities and arts. Let us bear firmly in mind that these are among the commitments of which Americans can be most proud.

Let me now return to the example from Greek tragedy with which I began, drawing together these ruminations about American colleges with my problems about compassion and the tragic imagination. As Hecuba's example shows, we need to understand the suffering of distant people, if we are to produce a world that is at least a little better than the one we currently know. As that example also shows, however, and as my talk has emphasized, we always risk error when we imagine the predicament of a distant person. But there are dangers in any act of imagining, and we should not let these particular dangers cause us to admit defeat prematurely, surrendering before an allegedly insuperable barrier of otherness. We should also not follow the path of Marcus, trying to pry ethical reasoning loose from its roots in the imagination and in particular loves. Instead, we can educate our imaginations, through criticism and self-criticism, through learning and artistic creativity – then trust our imaginations, then criticize them again, listening if possible to the critical voices of those we are trying to understand. Perhaps out of this dialectic between criticism and trust something like understanding may eventually grow. At least the product will very likely be better than

the obtuseness that so generally reigns in international relations. And I think that this dialectic can best be fostered by schools, colleges and universities, that take as their goal the task of producing independent, thoughtful, critical citizens of the world, and who use the arts to enrich their historical, ethical, and political thinking.

Rousseau said of such an education, "Thus from our weakness, our fragile happiness is born." Or, I would rather say (since we live in difficult times), that it might be born. But if this happiness is to be born, our liberal arts colleges and universities will be, I believe, its cradles.